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After Brezhnev

A Lengthy Succession To Kremlin's Top Job Has Begun, Many Say

Even if Current Ailing Chief
Lingers On a Few Years,
New Team Is Likely Soon
An Opportunity for Reagan?

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A political joke circulating in Moscow tells how a Russian is deep frozen until the year 2481. He switches on a TV set and has a heart attack when he sees the 126th congress of the Soviet Communist Party chaired by none other than Leonid Brezhnev.

For those who wondered whether Mr. Brezhnev would even make it through the 25th congress last year, the health of the Soviet leader is the stuff of rumors and gossip, and his longevity, despite an obviously frail condition, continues to frustrate obituary writers. After weeks of uncertainty about Mr. Brezhnev's condition—in which he was variously reported to be a stroke victim, suffering from heart disease or struck down by cancer—his usual three-car motorcade has been seen in recent days heading toward the Kremlin. And last Thursday, he reappeared in public, after a 27-day absence, to attend a Kremlin ceremony marking Lenin's birthday. He is said to have looked pale and thin, and he has been suffering, it now appears, from exhaustion or possibly a mild stroke.

But whether the 75-year-old Mr. Brezhnev dies or—a remote possibility—steps down anytime within the next few years, Kremlinologists agree that the long period of succession that will determine the Soviet Union's economic and foreign-policy path for the rest of this century has already begun.

"There is no doubt that by the end of the decade we will see a new Secretariat, a new Politburo and a new Presidium," says Seweryn Bialer of Columbia University, one of the world's leading Soviet specialists. "The succession will usher in a whole new generation of leaders."

Chance to Negotiate?

Many in Washington believe that the Reagan administration should be using this transition period to negotiate arms-limitation agreements and to encourage more-moderate Soviet policies instead of waiting for new, possibly intransigent leadership to emerge.

"It is the time for initiatives, because they could be tempted," says Zbigniew Brzezinski, the national security adviser in the Carter administration and a Soviet specialist. "It is a time of uncertainty for them, and we can take advantage of the moment to offer certainty at a price."

Western diplomats in Moscow see considerable evidence of disarray in the Brezhnev regime. "His health is clearly failing," one diplomat says, "and he and his associates are being labeled here as too old and ineffective." The internal criticism of Mr. Brezhnev's performance has become more evident of late as the military and the KGB, which with the party apparatus form the ruling elite, try to increase their influence. But, another diplomat says, "the old guard is entrenched and wants only to find ways to get by."

Administration Confused

Deciding how to approach the Brezhnev leadership has divided and confused the Reagan administration. Until recently, it was the hard-line economic and military policies advocated by Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger and by Richard Pipes, the National Security Council's Soviet affairs expert, that had won the day. The administration's use of the "stick" of economic sanctions and increased defense spending has angered and confused the Kremlin. Soviet officials constantly press Western correspondents for explanations of the administration's behavior.

Now, the more-moderate policies advanced by Secretary of State Alexander Haig and by most of his Soviet experts, as well as by White House political advisers, seem to be gaining ground. There is increased talk in administration circles of also using the "carrot" to win concessions from Moscow. Administration officials say they haven't any definitive ideas on how to do this, but they cite as evidence of changing policy Mr. Reagan's recent offer to meet with Mr. Brezhnev this summer—and such talks would probably be accompanied by a U.S. offer to reduce nuclear weapons sharply. (Mr. Brezhnev replied that he is ready for a formal summit meeting in a "neutral" European country.)

"Caretaker" Likely

A period of insecurity in Moscow, Soviet-watchers in Washington say, presents the U.S. with opportunities for possibly easing conditions in Poland by, for example, offering the Soviet Union in return its long-sought most-favored-nation trade status. The Reagan administration should be putting propositions such as this "up front, rather than remaining silent and seeing what emerges in Moscow," says William Hyland of the Carnegie Endowment for Peace in Washington.

Who or what will emerge is unknowable. But the widely held assumption is that Mr. Brezhnev will be succeeded by colleagues of much the same age and cast as himself who will have little real power of their own. It is beyond this "caretaker" period of the succession, when younger leaders emerge, that

so don't expect any major liberalizing reform," says Mr. Bialer of Columbia University.

But an overhaul of economic policy isn't considered likely, despite three disastrous harvests in a row, sagging industrial production and a shortage of hard currency to buy Western technology and agricultural products. Any decentralization of the system is viewed as dangerous, one Western diplomat says, because it would strengthen local power centers. The Polish challenge to the party's authority "has provided a lesson that has shaken the Politburo," he says.

Soviet technocrats themselves are calling for basic reform of collective farming and for a turn toward the market economy. A typical proponent of change is Abel Aganbeyan, one of the country's leading economists, who in a recent interview spoke of the need to "find something in between" the present Soviet system and Hungary's free-enterprise experiments. But Columbia's Mr. Bialer says such "fundamental reforms aren't on the agenda."

The country's "critical state," notes Robert C. Tucker of Princeton University, is due to inertia created by 18 years of Brezhnev leadership. But a new leader couldn't change things easily. He will need, Mr. Bialer says, economic reserves and political strength to bring about reform, "but the economy is in crisis and no reserves exist, and no leader can be strong until he has built up his constituency—this is the dilemma of the Soviet system."

The caution of the old men in the Kremlin is evident in the way in which the succession struggle is being played out in the absence of any mechanism for choosing a new leader. "Personal ambition is frowned on," says a Soviet journalist in Moscow. "There is much emphasis on continuing the sense of the rigid structure of things." Or, as one Western diplomat puts it, "This isn't a case of jockeying for power but more a movement of chairs."

Aging Leaders

Just as the country's economic problems have been allowed to deepen, so have arteries been hardening in the top leadership. The average age of the ruling 13-man Politburo is about 70, and it is somewhere in the mid-60s in the party's 318-member Central Committee. Many of the contenders for Mr. Brezhnev's top job as general secretary of the party are the same people who have surrounded him for much of his political life and are closely associated with his policies. (Most Kremlin-watchers assume that Mr. Brezhnev's other role as head of state will be given to another man.)